



**Homeland
Security**

Press Release

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MORE THAN 5 TONS OF COCAINE SEIZED FROM ONE VESSEL IN THE PACIFIC

Washington, DC – The Department of Homeland Security today announced that a multi-agency task force investigation based in Florida has resulted in the seizure of more than 5 tons of cocaine and the detention of 6 individuals aboard a fishing vessel in the Eastern Pacific. The size of this seizure is significant for a single vessel and highlights the continuing attempts by organizations to use maritime routes to bring illegal substances to the United States.

On March 29, 2005, the Alameda, California-based USCG Cutter Boutwell, working with a US Customs and Border Protections (CBP) aircraft, intercepted the fishing vessel *LESVOS*, approximately 300 miles west of Mexico. Aboard the vessel, the Coast Guard boarding team found 10,349 pounds of cocaine. Six crewmembers were detained.

“This is another victory in the security of our homeland,” said Adm. Thomas H. Collins, Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, “We stopped the damage this cocaine would cause on American streets before it even reached our borders. The dedicated support of our administrative, logistics and operational staffs, and the sacrifice made by Boutwell’s crew and their families during this long deployment have paid a huge dividend.”

“This seizure is a textbook example of law enforcement team work at its finest,” said Robert C. Bonner, Commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection. “CBP is committed to denying our maritime, air, and land borders to those who wish to harm our citizens. This disruption of the illegal drug trade is part of our defense in depth homeland security strategy.”

The seizure was the result of a multi-agency, collaborative effort under the auspices of “Operation Panama Express” which is a long-standing Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force investigation based out of Tampa, Florida.

Members of the “Operation Panama Express” team include the U.S. Attorney for the Middle District of Florida, the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-South), the Internal Revenue Service - Criminal Investigative Division, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, and the Sheriff’s Offices from Pinellas and Sarasota Counties.

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ICE, FBI, and DEA agents on the Panama Express investigative team developed intelligence that the *LESVOS* was transporting cocaine in the Pacific. The agents passed this data to the Joint Interagency

Task Force-South (JIATF-South), which dispatched the CBP aircraft to locate the cocaine-laden vessel. In addition, JIATF-South dispatched the cutter Boutwell.

"Organizations with the capacity to move this quantity of contraband in the holds of ships pose a serious threat to our homeland. Battling this threat requires an intelligence-based approach by law enforcement. This seizures demonstrates what can be achieved when our drug interdiction efforts are guided by quality intelligence – as ICE, DEA and FBI agents jointly developed the information that ultimately led to the interdiction of this vessel," said Michael J. Garcia, the Department of Homeland Security Assistant Secretary for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

During this search, the Jacksonville, Florida-based CBP P-3 interceptor aircraft spotted the *LESVOS* traveling off the coast of Mexico and passed the information on to the cutter Boutwell while maintaining a covert track. The Boutwell subsequently intercepted the *LESVOS* and the Coast Guard boarding team found discovered 200 bales containing the cocaine hidden within two fish holds.

LESVOS' six-man crew was detained by the boarding team and will be transferred to Special Agents assigned to Operation Panama Express in Guatemala.

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